

#208 EVERETT MILLER: USS *PHOENIX*

**John Martini (JM):** Today is December 5, 1991. This is an oral history interview tape, Mr. Everett Miller. On December 7, 1941, Mr. Miller was a Seaman First Class, assigned to the cruiser USS *PHOENIX*, in Pearl Harbor. This interview is being done in conjunction with the National Park Service and the USS *ARIZONA* Memorial and radio station, television KHET here in Honolulu. On the date of December 7, Mr. Miller was nineteen years of age. Today he resides in Sandusky, Ohio. Thanks for coming.

**Everett Miller (EM):** Thank you.

JM: All right. How did you get into the Navy? When did you join up and why?

EM: Well, I graduated in June from Sandusky High School.

JM: Forty-one?

EM: In 1941 and at the time, there wasn't too many jobs available, so I decided to go in the Navy. And well, there was a friend of mine I used to chum around with when I was a teenager, and he kind of talked me into it. And so it was in September, we went down to the recruiting office -- they had a recruiting office there in Sandusky -- and we went down to the recruiting office and asked them if we could join.

Well, I think it took a few weeks. My being underage, the recruiter, he was the chief. I don't know what his rank was, but he was a chief, I know that. And he came out to the house and my mother and father had to sign for me, 'cause I wasn't old enough.

JM: You had to be twenty-one?

EM: I think you had to be twenty-one, yeah. I think they've changed that since, though. And so I think it was a couple weeks, we went to Cleveland and we took our physical and we both passed. And then I remember distinctly they sent us home for two weeks, because they had filled their quota and they said, "We'll call you when we need you."

So it was two weeks later, they called us and we went to Cleveland. We [had] already been sworn in the first time we went up to Cleveland, and they told us come back, so we went up to Cleveland and then they sent us to Great Lakes, Illinois.

JM: For your basic training?

EM: Basic training, mm-hm.

JM: Was the USS *PHOENIX* -- was that the first ship you were assigned to?

EM: Yes, it was.

JM: When did you join her?

EM: We --- it was in Mare Island.

JM: California?

EM: California, when we went aboard the *PHOENIX*.

JM: Mm-hm. About when was that?

EM: That was, I think it was around December of 1940.

JM: Just to clarify, you said you enlisted in the year 1940, and underwent training so you joined the ship in December 1940?

EM: Yes.

JM: So about a year before . . .

EM: Yeah, I think they gave us -- I think it was about nine weeks of boot camp training.

JM: Okay.

EM: And then you --- they gave you about a week's leave before you went on aboard ship.

JM: When you joined her up in Mare Island, was your first cruise -- was it all the way to Honolulu, or were you out somewhere else?

EM: They were in Mare Island for every once in a while, you had repair work done. That's what they was doing, repair work and we went out to sea a couple times, you know, for test run and then we went to Long Beach for -- we was in Long Beach for maybe a couple weeks. I really don't know if it was a week or two. But then we went to Honolulu and went to Pearl Harbor.

JM: You got here about when?

EM: That was in December of, sometime in December of 1940.

JM: How'd you like duty in Pearl Harbor? How was Pearl Harbor and Honolulu as a Navy town?

EM: Well, it was the first time I ever been away from Ohio in the winter time. And I kind of liked the weather, 'cause it was like summer all year round, you know. And it was real nice.

JM: You --- December 6, day before the attack, how long had the *PHOENIX* been in port?

EM: Maybe three or four days, I think.

JM: You were rotating, going in and out of port at that time?

EM: We had got --- have gunnery exercise and a month before December, before the war started, we escorted a ship to Manila. And we were in Manila, well, we visited maybe three or four islands, it was in Manila. We went to Cebu and Iloilo, and Mindanao, Zamboanga. That's a city on Mindanao, I think. But we went down to Zamboanga, and then we went back to Manila and we escorted a

tanker that was going back to San Francisco. And we escorted it -- I think we took it about halfway between Hawaii and San Francisco, and then we left it. We turned back and went back to Honolulu.

JM: That day, I know you were tied up off the end of Ford Island, by yourself, out there at one of the mooring buoys. What were your duties on the morning of December 7? What were you supposed to be doing that day?

EM: Well, really, that was a free day. I mean, you know, you didn't have your usual duties, except maybe sweeping down or clamping down the decks and keep it real clean. You had to --- if you didn't have liberty, you didn't have to really do much, like you would the other five, six days . . .

JM: Mm-hm.

EM: . . . that you were there. When we were down in our living quarters, and we had a record player down there. Some of the guys were playing records and we was listening to 'em. And heard over the P.A. system, "Man your battle stations. Japanese air attack."

JM: They said it was . . .

EM: That's what they said, "Japanese air attack."

And I heard this one guy, he said, "This is a hell of a day for a sham battle."

And so we run to our battle stations. My battle station, I was two decks below the main deck, and it didn't take me too long to get up there. But anyway . . .

JM: Would you like to --- where was your battle station?

EM: Battle station was fourth and fifth loader on the five-inch twenty-five. And as soon as I got on top deck, I knew it wasn't a sham battle. We could see the Battleship Row was all burning. The ships were all burning. And we had awnings -- we had put awning up when we come into port, you know. And when --- we didn't want to take time to take 'em down, like we usually did, so we just took our knives and cut 'em down. So you get to --- the gun ready to fire, 'cause, as soon as possible.

JM: Was there ammunition already ready for the guns?

EM: We had ammunition in our ready boxes, and . . .

JM: Was the --- were the boxes locked or unlocked?

EM: I really don't know if they were unlocked or locked. But anyway, we started firing and they had fuses, you had to put those -- tips of the . . .

JM: The shell?

EM: The shell. And the fuses, then you had to crank the crank, crank it up, set the fuse on it. I really don't know how they really work, but you could set it for . . .

JM: Generally timed for anti-aircraft.

EM: Yeah. You could set it for distance, whatever distance you thought the plane was away from you, you know. And I don't even know, maybe we didn't set some of the fuses but I remember distinctly there was one, it was a Jap plane. He\ --- and he was going to take a pass at us. And I knew it was a Jap plane, 'cause they didn't have retractable landing gears on their planes. They just had those wells on the wheels. And they shot at him and you could see the shell exploded in front of me, but I don't know, or I don't think we hit him because he turned off -- the minute he turned now, he turned off to the right and he went across our bow. But he didn't drop a torpedo on our, or bomb on us.

But anyway, then I heard them announce over the P.A. system, "Make all preparations for getting under way," you know. So I guess they gave us permission to get under way and we was going to go out of the harbor. And when we got under way, we started around south of Ford Island and we got about halfway around there, and they told us to go back to our berth. Well, I learned later why. The *NEVADA* was blocking the channel between the south channel -- you know, it goes into one channel and they were blocking the south channel. So they told us to go back to our berth.

So we went back to our berth and in a little while, I don't know, maybe fifteen, twenty minutes, they gave us permission to go out around the battleships. And we went right by all the battleships that were burning.

JM: Did you --- you saw *ARIZONA*, *WEST VIRGINIA*? What was going through your mind?

EM: Well, I was scared, afraid, you know. And I don't know what was going to happen. I thought maybe they was out at the end of the harbor, waiting on us. But I remember when we hit the exit of the harbor, I think they turned around flank speed, because we already took off. I didn't know a ship could go that fast. (Chuckles) Really.

JM: Do you --- when you got up top, you started passing ammunition.

EM: Mm-hm.

JM: What were your impressions of what was going on around you? Were you --- did you look around at other activity in the harbor? Were you aware of things like the *ARIZONA* exploding? Were you focused on just doing your job? What goes through your --- how do you direct your energies when you're in the middle of a battle all of a sudden?

EM: I was --- I knew what I had to do and I just thought, "Well, see if we can get some of them, knock some of them down before they get us."

I figured they would --- I was a goner anyway, by looking at the battleships. And I figure, well, just try to knock a few of them down before they get us.

JM: You really thought that you were going to eat it that day.

EM: I really thought that was the end. Mm-hm.

JM: What did you do when you cleared the channel? What did they assign you to?

EM: Well, we --- I don't know what the name of the other ships was, but we formed a task force, 'cause we didn't know whether they was going to -- they was coming back or not. I think there was a couple of heavy cruisers, but I don't remember their names. But we were out maybe three or four days, and then we came back in Pearl Harbor.

JM: Did you spot anything? Any --- were there any alerts? Any sub activity?

EM: No. We didn't.

JM: When you came back in, do you -- like the same berth, or where did they have you go?

EM: Yeah, we tied up back over there where the cruisers always tied up, by Aiea.

JM: What was Pearl Harbor looking like by then?

EM: It looked about the same. Well, it was still smoking, but you know, they -- fires were probably out by then. But there was still smoke coming up, a lot of smoke.

JM: What's your single most vivid memory, that you keep with you after fifty years of that day?

EM: Well, I don't know. I think maybe -- you mean, what happened that day? I remember the time that we got out of the harbor, it was -- when I was here in Hawaii in 1945, there was a guy on it that lived here, he was on the *HONOLULU*, and his name was Ray Emory. And I told him, I says, "Ray," I says, "I don't think it was, we got out of that harbor 'til about three o'clock."

And he says, "Oh, no." He says, "You got out of there before that."

And so he got hold of the ship log somehow, and we got under way at 10:10, it was ten after ten.

JM: You mean the attack was ending and you were getting out.

EM: And it seems kind of ironic, but when I came over here in 1986, I stayed in the Waikiki Surf -- I think it was the Outrigger Surf, a hotel. My room number was 1010.

JM: For ten-ten dock, and the time of 10:10.

EM: Yeah, it was ten. Mm-hm.

JM: How do you, after fifty years, how do you feel about your enemies that day, Japan and the Japanese?

EM: I don't feel any animosity towards 'em. They had to do their job. We had to do our job. And the way I look at it, I don't hold any grudges. I don't think it's good for you to hold a grudge, you know. It just shows a sign of immaturity. That's what I think, if you hold a grudge against somebody.

JM: This tape is going to be used by researchers and historians for, I believe, for years to come. What should people remember about Pearl Harbor?

EM: Well, what do people remember?

JM: What should people remember?

EM: Well, just the Pearl Harbor logo, "Keep America alert." (Chuckles)

JM: Thank you for coming.

EM: Thank you for asking me here.

END OF INTERVIEW